

CHAPTER XVII

Mr. Duge Fails

NORRIS VINE was without a doubt trapped. He realized it from the moment Phineas Duge closed the door and turned the key. The two men who had entered were to all appearance absolutely harmless and ordinary. They were dressed most correctly in dark clothes of fashionable cut. Each wore a silk hat, and would have passed without a moment's question amongst any ordinary group of better-class city men. Nevertheless, when at his quick motion toward the bell the fingers of one of them closed upon his arm, he knew very well that he was helpless. He suffered them to lead him without resistance into the little sitting-room. What could he have done? If he had opened his mouth to call out, he saw the hand of the man who was watching him, with his arm linked through his, ready to close his lips. They all passed into the sitting-room, and Phineas Duge closed the door behind them.

“I am sorry” he said, “to resort to such old-fashioned measures, but as you know I am methodical in all my ways. The first place to look for stolen goods is obviously in the abode of the thief.

Frankly, I have not much expectation of discovering anything here. At the same time I could not afford to run the risk of leaving these rooms and your person unsearched."

"I can quite appreciate that," Norris Vine said, seating himself in the armchair towards which he was being gently pushed. "The only favour I will ask is that you are as quick as possible, as I have rather a busy afternoon, and want to lunch early."

"These gentlemen," Phineas Duge remarked, "are quite used to little affairs of this sort. I do not think that you need fear that there will be any undue delay."

Even while he spoke both of them were busy. Vine felt a silken cord being drawn about his legs and chest. Something was slid softly into his mouth. In less than two minutes he was bound and gagged. Then he had an opportunity, so far as the sitting-room was concerned, of watching a search conducted upon scientific principles.

In about twenty minutes the place looked as though a tornado had struck it. The search, however, was over. The two men were prepared to guarantee that no papers of any sort were hidden in any place within the reach of any one in that room. They carried him, bound as he was, into the bedroom, and he watched with interest, and some admiration, a repetition of the search. The result, however, was the same. Then the two men came over to him, and he felt his bonds softly.

loosened. Only the gag remained in his mouth, and one by one his garments were removed from him. A trained valet could not have been more careful or deft. The contents of all his pockets were hastily run through and restored. His under garments were felt all over for any hidden hiding place. Even his shoes were taken off, and the inner sole cut through with a knife. Finally the two men turned towards Phineas Duge. Their faces were a mute expression of the fact that the search was over. Phineas Duge motioned them to remove the gag. They did so, and Vine, who was now free, stood up and commenced to dress.

"I am sorry," Phineas Duge said calmly, "to have inconvenienced you, but, of course, a person who becomes a receiver of stolen goods is always liable to a little affair of this sort. You are quite at liberty to ring the bell now if you like, and to make complaints about us. My methods may have seemed to you a little melodramatic, but as a matter of fact they are entirely commonplace. These two gentlemen are connected with the American police, and it may interest you to know that we have with us warrants for the arrest both of yourself and my daughter, Miss Stella Duge, on the charge of theft and conspiracy. All that we have done here has been quite legal, except that we should have been accompanied by a gentleman from Scotland Yard, with whose presence we preferred to dispense. You can make what complaints you like, and I shall immediately apply for your ex-

tradition. In any case I expect to do so to-morrow or the next day, if a certain document is not forthcoming. You see I am placing myself in your hands. You have time even now to cable its contents to New York before the warrant can be executed."

Norris Vine was busy tying his tie, and waited for a moment until he had arranged it to his satisfaction. Then he turned round.

"I can assure you," he said, "I have not the slightest intention of making any complaint with regard to your doings here. In fact, I can truthfully say that I have rather enjoyed the whole proceeding. To tell you the truth," he continued, moving across the room and taking a cigarette from the mantelpiece and lighting it, "when I heard that you were in England, I was exceedingly curious to know what your methods would be. 'Phineas Duge the Invincible' they have called you. I knew that you came over here because you had entered into a fresh alliance with your gang, and I knew therefore that you came over to get back that document. I imagine that if you can get it you can make your own terms with them. I must say that I have been exceedingly curious to know what your methods would be in approaching me. Littleson could suggest nothing better than a bribe and a common burglary. There is something much more attractive about the way you have opened the proceedings. I consider that this little affair, for instance, has been most artistic. If you have not discovered what you sought, you

have at least discovered the fact that it is not here. That gives you something to start upon. How kind of your assistants! I see that they are putting my room straight again."

Phineas Duke nodded. He showed no disappointment at the ill-success of this first effort, and he was watching Vine all the time curiously.

"Your further plan of operations," Vine continued, "is again worthy of you. I believe all that you say. I believe that you have the warrants, and I believe that you could easily obtain an extradition order. On the other hand, I am perfectly well aware that this is only a *feint*. It is a good scheme up to a certain point, of course, although neither your daughter nor myself could be convicted of conspiracy without the production of what we are supposed to have stolen. Still, as I said, it is a *good feint*, and it has made me curious. I wonder what your real scheme is! I do not think that you will tell me that."

Phineas Duke smiled.

"You should have been a diplomatist, Mr. Vine," he said. "As a journalist you are wasted. You might even have achieved what I presume you would have called infamy, as a financier."

"Ah, well!" Norris Vine said, "the world is full of those who have missed their vocation. I am content to pass amongst the throng. Can I offer you anything before you go? A whisky and soda, or a glass of sherry?"

"I think not, thank you," Phineas Duke said.

“ You are naturally in a hurry to keep your luncheon engagement, and I see that my friends have succeeded in restoring your apartment to some semblance of order. We part now to pass on to the second stage of our little duel. Understand that, so far as regards this little matter of business, I have no special ill-feeling towards you, Mr. Vine. I ask you even no questions concerning your friendship with my daughter. She is old enough to know her own mind, and she has heard my views often enough; but I should like you to know this, and to remember that I who say it am a man of many faults, but one virtue: never in my life have I broken my word. If I find that my niece has disappeared through any ill-usage of yours, I will risk the few years that may be left to me of life, and I will shoot you like a dog the first time that we meet.”

Norris Vine looked gravely across at the man whose words, so quietly spoken, seemed yet from their very repression to be charged with an intense dramatic force. He knew so well that the man who spoke them meant what he said and would surely keep his word. He shrugged his shoulders very slightly.

“ My dear sir,” he said, “ I fear that I have misunderstood you. I could have imagined your sentiment being aroused by the sight of a dollar bill being burnt and wasted, but I never expected to see it kindled upon the subject of your niece, or any other human being. I amend my judgment of you. You are really not the man I thought you were

If your friends have quite finished"—he took up his hat and glanced for a moment at his watch. Duge turned toward the door.

"Once more, Mr. Vine," he said, "my regrets, and good-morning!"

The three men left the room. Vine remained, leaning against the mantelpiece, and whistling softly to himself. He went through the whole of a popular ballad, and then he tried it in a different key. When he was sure that the three men had had time to leave the building, he too took up his hat and went out.